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Developments in Indochina

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DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA

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The Communists may be planning to step up military pressure against Phnom Penh. Although a major ground assault still seems unlikely, the Khmer Communists' capabilities for carrying out commando-style actions in the city appear to be growing.

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The Communists see little reason to launch a major military offensive in Laos at this time and intend to drag their feet in the current negotiations.

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Thieu's political opponents continue to maneuver among themselves with little success.

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Peking has made it clear that it considers some of its interests in Cambodia were enhanced during Sihanouk's recent trip to Cambodia. Indochina will be high on the list for discussion at the foreign ministers' meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations this weekend in Thailand. The People's Revolutionary Government and the Soviets issued different versions of the communique following Madame Binh's visit to the USSR.

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CAMBODIA

The Threat to Phnom Penh

The Communists' current propaganda offensive, centered on Sihanouk's recent visit to the "liberated zone," paints a contrasting picture of insurgent unity and government political and military tail-spin in Phnom Penh. The Communists may now be planning to drive this line home by stepping up pressure against the capital itself.

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According to the latest estimate by the US defense attaché in Phnom Penh, between 20 and 25 Khmer Communist battalions are within a 25-mile radius of the capital--roughly the same force the insurgents have had in this area for some time. Although the Communists apparently intend to use some of these units to attack positions close to Phnom Penh, a major assault against the well-manned capital defenses still seems unlikely.

The Communists probably judge they have less to risk and more to gain by mounting a campaign of sapper raids, sabotage, and terrorism in the capital itself. At a time when Phnom Penh is still recovering from a major political crisis, faces a serious shortage of POL and other essential commodities, and remains under heavy military pressure, such a guerrilla campaign could be psychologically damaging. The Communists, at a minimum, would expect to lessen public confidence in the Lon Nol government further. They

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may hope that a major outbreak of violence in the capital could provoke a new political crisis that might collapse the regime.

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In any case, the Khmer Communists' capabilities for carrying out commando-style actions in the city appear to be growing. [REDACTED]

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LAOSMilitary Prospects

With the negotiations in Vientiane at an impasse, it is tempting to draw a parallel between the present situation and the events leading to the formation of the coalition government in 1962. At that time the Communists successfully used military pressure to influence the course of negotiations. Their defeat of General Phoumi Nosavan's troops at Nam Tha broke a 13-month deadlock at the conference table and forced the rightists into joining in a troika government with the neutralists and Communists. This raises an obvious question: are the Communists now casting about for another Nam Tha? Apparently not.

In contrast to 1962, it is the Communists who are dragging their feet in the current negotiations. The Communist stalling strategy probably has a variety of objectives, one of which is to frustrate the Souvanna government through delays into softening its terms. Overall, the stalling strategy is probably grounded in a general belief that the Communists' strategic political position throughout Indochina will gradually become stronger in the coming months as their forces refit and rebuild in Vietnam and Laos. They are pursuing a similar stalling game in Paris with the South Vietnamese.

The Communists can ensure a continued impasse merely by sticking to their present unacceptable proposals for implementation of the 22 February agreement. Sharply increased military pressure would gain them little in this respect and could prove counterproductive. The Communists probably have concluded that heightened combat would invite at least a limited resumption of US bombing--which they would obviously prefer to avoid. In terms of the negotiations themselves, increased Communist military activity would bring Prime Minister Souvanna under pressure from

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his right wing to take a harder line. This would only make it more difficult for the Communists to get what they want at the conference table once they begin to negotiate seriously.

The nature of the fighting in Laos since the cease-fire went into effect bears out this point of view. The North Vietnamese attacks under way in the Tha Viang area, for example, have been characterized by the Pathet Lao as a legitimate reaction to what they view as government encroachment into an area nominally under Communist control at the time of the cease-fire deadline. Communist resistance to government efforts to re-establish a presence in areas only nominally under Vientiane's control at the time of the cease-fire have resulted in a series of small engagements southeast of Thakhek and northeast of Khong Sedone. Pathet Lao units clearly have been the aggressors in the remote northwest where government territory has been significantly reduced. But this area has never been of vital interest to Vientiane, and the attacks are more likely designed to clear the way for Chinese road builders or to round out Communist holdings rather than to influence the negotiations.

The only area in which there are signs that the Communists may be prepared to break this pattern is at Sala Phou Khoun. Communist defectors claim that a move on the key road junction between the royal capital of Luang Prabang and Vientiane is in the offing. So far, however, there is little evidence to confirm such plans, and the Communists, after weighing the possible gains against the likely consequences, may have scrapped or delayed any plans to retake Sala Phou Khoun.

Government and Communist units will continue to skirmish in areas such as Thakhek and Tha Viang if one side believes the other is aggrandizing his territory. But as long as the Communists are primarily motivated by a desire to delay implementation of the Laos accords, the character of military activity is not likely to change.

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SOUTH VIETNAMA Look at the Fighting

Communist military action--at scattered locations throughout the country--has fluctuated greatly during the past few days. Shellings in the northern provinces, for example, fell to the lowest number recorded in the past year on 11 April, but rose sharply the following day to near the daily average since the cease-fire.

There have been sharp clashes in Kontum Province, but at least some Communist and government units there apparently have reached a tentative accommodation and fighting is dropping off. The Communists are maintaining pressure on the government outpost at Tonle Cham, although the intensity of the shellings has dropped substantially.

Action in the southernmost provinces remains largely confined to Chuong Thien and Dinh Tuong, and the western delta near the Cambodian border. Here, as elsewhere in the country, most of the enemy-initiated action has been harassing shellings.

Saigon's forces have also been busy during the past week. In the northern provinces they have fired some 2,000 artillery rounds daily, nearly double the rate from Communist gunners. Security operations have also been mounted in numerous parts of the country. In the western delta, for example, the South Vietnamese 9th Division has been attacking close to and across the Cambodian border in an effort to blunt the Communist thrust at Hong Nhu. In addition, government forces patrolling from newly constructed outposts in or near Communist-held territory have captured unusually large quantities of arms and ammunition in the past few days.

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Maneuvering Among Thieu's Political Opponents

Opposition forces and independents are still adjusting to the changed political climate brought on by the cease-fire and the presidential decree on political parties. The efforts of some of these groups to strengthen their positions by combining forces continue to be plagued by rivalries among politicians. All of these groups see the Communists as a greater evil than the Thieu government, but despite their generally weak position, few seem ready to join the government camp at this point.

Two new coalitions trying to qualify as legal political parties have internal difficulties. The

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six-faction Social Democratic Alliance has two large groups, each working to control the alliance. Leaders of the Progressive Nationalist Movement (PNM) faction reportedly believe they have isolated the other large group--the Farmer-Worker Party--by gaining the backing of three of the smaller factions.

The second coalition, the Freedom Party, which includes three Catholic-based factions, may have even more severe problems. The party has decided to disband its leadership bodies in favor of a more informal arrangement, and also has decided not to put up a slate of candidates for the Senate elections in August. Leaders of two of the factions, apparently believing the party must have the government's tolerance if it is to survive, want to remove a leader of the third because of his "constant anti-administration outbursts." The third faction has reluctantly agreed to this move, but believes the party's new policies will eventually be the "death knell" of the Freedom Party.

Some consistently anti-government legislators and other political figures have sent two separate appeals to the US calling for the implementation of "democratic freedoms" in South Vietnam under the cease-fire agreement. Some of these figures are close to Big Minh, and their assertions that the third element of the Council of National Reconciliation and Concord should represent an alleged "silent majority" that does not support either side reflect Minh's views. The appeals have not been published in the Saigon press and have had little impact within the country.

Backers of former vice-president Ky, who has been politically inactive since his term ended in late 1971, reportedly are seeking support for him, either as a spokesman for "neutralist elements" or a candidate for

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office in any future election. A member of the Saigon city council is contacting students, religious leaders, junior civil servants, and junior military officers on Vy's behalf. The councilman claims that the former vice-president has strong support among the military officers, who are ready to take whatever action Ky requests. Many military officers do regard Ky sympathetically, but the claims of active support appear greatly exaggerated. [REDACTED]

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INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

China and Sihanouk

Peking has made clear that it believes at least some of its interests in Cambodia were enhanced during Sihanouk's recent trip to Indochina. Chinese satisfaction was expressed by the high-level turnout, led by Chou En-lai, that greeted Sihanouk at Peking's airport on 11 April and by a generally laudatory editorial in *People's Daily*.

The editorial suggests that, in Peking's view, much of the factionalism that has characterized the Khmer Communists was dissipated during Sihanouk's visit, and Sihanouk himself won general acknowledgment as leader of the insurgents' political and military front. More important, *People's Daily* implies that Peking is particularly satisfied at indications that the North Vietnamese are willing to support Sihanouk's return to power.

Chinese interests have been bound up with Sihanouk's ever since his ouster in March 1970 and subsequent retirement to Peking. The depth of this commitment was clearly reflected this week when Chinese representatives walked out of a session of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) in Tokyo to protest the seating of a delegation representing the Lon Nol government. *People's Daily* indicates that new signs of Khmer solidarity behind Sihanouk add weight to long-standing Chinese claims that he heads Cambodia's only legitimate government and that he must be a decisive factor in any postwar arrangement.

Less clear is Peking's view of Khmer Communist political and military strategy in the wake of Sihanouk's trip. *People's Daily* contains the familiar vague formulations regarding a settlement but, as in

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the past, refrains from calling Sihanouk's 1970 five-point proposal the only way to resolve the problem. The editorial does include the strongest statement Peking has yet made regarding the US bombing, calling it a "complete violation" of the Paris agreement. Chou En-lai also used some stiff language in remarks at a banquet for Sihanouk on 12 April, calling for an end to American bombing and indicating that withdrawal of US support for Lon Nol was the key to a Cambodian settlement. Chinese spokesmen have used such themes before, although rarely in public at Chou's level.

Peking has never, in fact, wholly endorsed Sihanouk's terms for a settlement, although there have been sketchy indications that China has recently moved closer to his position. Barring an early military take-over by the insurgents or a collapse of Phnom Penh, the Chinese almost certainly favor a negotiated settlement--involving Sihanouk--as the best way of enhancing their own larger political interests. In this connection, Sihanouk himself has claimed that Chou told him no further Chinese military aid would be sent to the Khmer insurgents because the Paris agreement flatly prohibits such deliveries.

China's apparent reticence in clarifying its position after Sihanouk's trip suggests continued reserve over whatever terms and political strategy Sihanouk and his allies in Indochina have fashioned.

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ASEAN and Indochina

Indochina will figure prominently in discussions during the foreign ministers' meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) scheduled for 16-18 April in Pattaya, Thailand. Indonesia, which sees itself as the natural leader of Southeast Asia, has for some time taken the initiative in trying to create an independent Southeast Asian voice on Indochina. It can be expected to take the lead

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in discussing future relations with Indochina, including ASEAN's possible role in reconstruction and the feasibility of ASEAN membership for the four Indochina nations. Jakarta will also report on the discussions at the Paris Conference and on its recent experiences with the ICCS.

ASEAN's increasing interest in Indochina affairs reflects the members' growing confidence in the organization and their commitment to increased regional cooperation. With the reduction of hostilities in Indochina, the members see greater prospects for creating a large and cohesive regional bloc that would lessen the opportunities for great power intervention in the area. ASEAN has invited Burma and the Indochina states to send observers to next week's meeting, but is still uncertain which ones will attend. In any case, the members will continue pursuing their expansion plans.

Indonesia, which has ties with Hanoi and the PRG as well as the other Indochina capitals, strongly supports close relations between North Vietnam and ASEAN. Jakarta believes this would increase ASEAN's credibility as a regional spokesman and also be a first step toward weaning the North Vietnamese away from what the Indonesians consider to be Hanoi's close association with Peking.

Other ASEAN members are becoming increasingly receptive to the Indonesian point of view. Kuala Lumpur recently opened full diplomatic relations with Hanoi, and Singapore has a permanent, quasi-official North Vietnamese trade mission. Bangkok is attempting to open talks with Hanoi on refugee repatriation and would like to see such a channel develop into a full political dialogue that could lead to diplomatic ties. Although there has been some talk in Manila about the need for official relations with Hanoi, the Philippine Government is lagging behind other ASEAN states in focusing on the problem.

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PRG Issues Unusual Communique After Moscow Visit

The "joint" communique issued by the PRG following Foreign Minister Binh's visit to Moscow earlier this month contains some striking differences from the Soviet version. Normally, both participants issue identical communiqués after such a visit. This time, however, the PRG obviously did not get what it wanted in the Soviet version, even though Madame Binh herself received exceptionally good treatment. The separate communique appears to underscore PRG dissatisfaction with Moscow's Vietnam line.

The most notable discrepancy is the language concerning the PRG's role in the South. In its text, the PRG calls itself the "sole legitimate representative of the aspirations of the South Vietnamese peoples"; the Soviet version merely credits them with being the "true spokesman." In addition, the Soviet version is a little more explicit in calling upon "all" parties to live up to the Paris agreement.

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